

## Introduction

Have you ever heard a story in which every point of the story was somehow worse than the one that came before? A few years ago, when Dawnae and I were newlyweds, we stopped at a 7-11 for Slurpees. We knew where every 7-11 was and we had a good idea which flavors each store had. We found ourselves at the 7-11 on South Division.

We entered the store and headed straight to the back, where the Slurpee machine was. We were the only customers in the store, and we felt we were being watched. We approached the counter with our Slurpees and the cashier asked us a question in a very thick southern accent: “Can I ask y’all a question?” The snarky responses to this question write themselves, but a feeling of dread had already come over us so we simply said, “Sure”.

“Are y’all married?”, she asked. Again, the snarky responses wanted to come out, along with pointing to the very obvious rings on our fingers—we were newlyweds, after all, and the rings still glowed. “Yes, we are.” “Where did y’all meet?”, she asked. Okay, that’s three questions, but...there was this feeling of dread, like we were watching a car accident in extremely slow motion moments before impact.

We told her we met in Bible college. “Did your parents object?” This is the moment the music changed, becoming more intense, more eerie. Object? To what? Going to Bible college? She apparently recognized the confusion on our faces so she explained her question by telling us, “Well, I was raised to hate every [insert lengthy series of Asian slurs] I ever met. In fact, I was raised to love them [insert n-word] more than them [Asian slur].”

We couldn’t move. The impact of the car accident had just happened and we were watching the crumple zones on the cars begin to fold. She explained that her father had fought in Vietnam and her grandfather had fought in Korea, and both instilled in the family a profound hatred for anyone of Asian descent. At this point we began to feel a slight sense of relief because it seemed the story was finished. All we needed to do was pay for the Slurpees and get out of there. The story was not finished.

She explained that she moved up north—to Grand Rapids—and discovered, quote, “Those people are *everywhere*!” She explained her landlord was a “Chinaman”. She said she doesn’t understand a word he says but she pays him the rent every month when he stops by to collect. Then she told us about a “Vietnam guy” who comes in to the store to buy cigarettes. He just points at what he wants and she grabs them for him.

At this point we were wondering why she was telling us this. Then she dropped the bomb: she realized after interacting with so many Asian folk that she didn’t have to be the way she was raised to be! She realized she could overcome the racism and prejudice instilled by her upbringing. She had resolved to no longer hate Asian people. The sense of victory over racism in her was *palpable*. She really believed she had changed. She had not changed.

Having done all the talking up to this point she finally said, “So your parents didn’t object?” “No, they were happy for us”, I said. Cuz, you know, *they’re not racists*. Dawnae added, “I’m adopted”. A visible sense of relief washed over this poor woman and she

exclaimed, “Oh! Your parents are *regular people*!”

Reading the book of Judges is like this. Just when you think it cannot get any worse, you turn the page and you discover it is at the very least just as bad and likely worse than the page before. In these pages we read the story of God’s people—raised by him in a sense, in the land he had given them. He had instilled his values and ethics by giving them the law through Moses. These commandments were God’s self-revelation, showing his people what he is like. They were to reflect the Lord their God in how they dealt with one another and with the nations around them. They did not reflect the Lord their God in how they dealt with one another and with the nations around them.

We come to chapter 21 today. The final chapter. We long for the story arc to be better, for there to be hope for brighter days for Israel. Verse 1.

Jdgs 21:1 Now the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, “No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin.” <sup>2</sup> And the people came to Bethel and sat there till evening before God, and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. <sup>3</sup> And they said, “O LORD, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?” <sup>4</sup> And the next day the people rose early and built there an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. <sup>5</sup> And the people of Israel said, “Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the LORD?” For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the LORD to Mizpah, saying, “He shall surely be put to death.” <sup>6</sup> And the people of Israel had compassion for Benjamin their brother and said, “One tribe is cut off from Israel this day. <sup>7</sup> What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them any of our daughters for wives?”

<sup>8</sup> And they said, “What one is there of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the LORD to Mizpah?” And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh-gilead, to the assembly. <sup>9</sup> For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead was there. <sup>10</sup> So the congregation sent 12,000 of their bravest men there and commanded them, “Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword; also the women and the little ones. <sup>11</sup> This is what you shall do: every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction.” <sup>12</sup> And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him, and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

<sup>13</sup> Then the whole congregation sent word to the people of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon and proclaimed peace to them. <sup>14</sup> And Benjamin returned at that time. And they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead, but they were not enough for them. <sup>15</sup> And the people had compassion on Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.

<sup>16</sup> Then the elders of the congregation said, “What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin?” <sup>17</sup> And they said, “There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a

tribe not be blotted out from Israel. <sup>18</sup> Yet we cannot give them wives from our daughters.” For the people of Israel had sworn, “Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin.” <sup>19</sup> So they said, “Behold, there is the yearly feast of the LORD at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.” <sup>20</sup> And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, “Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards <sup>21</sup> and watch. If the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and snatch each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. <sup>22</sup> And when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, ‘Grant them graciously to us, because we did not take for each man of them his wife in battle, neither did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.’” <sup>23</sup> And the people of Benjamin did so and took their wives, according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and lived in them. <sup>24</sup> And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family, and they went out from there every man to his inheritance.

<sup>25</sup> In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Judges 21:1–25

## The Problem

Having all but wiped out the men of an entire tribe, the rest of the people recognize a significant problem: an entire tribe of Israel is all but wiped out. Remember how we got here. The men of Gibeah, each one from the tribe of Benjamin, attacked and brutally murdered a woman of Judah. Rather than deal with the crime the way God had instructed them, all Israel chose to go to war with the entire tribe.

After making their decision, they sought God’s “guidance” and he reminded them the tribe of Judah should handle this, since the woman was a Judahite. The murderers must be brought to justice and that justice should come from the hand of her family, her clan within the tribe of Judah. Instead of justice, the eleven tribes pursued vengeance and since the tribe of Benjamin wouldn’t participate in the wholesale destruction of the city of Gibeah, they went to war. Though greatly outnumbered, Benjamin won the first two battles against the rest of Israel, killing a tenth of their massive army. This was God’s discipline on his people for failing to follow him fully.

Finally, the eleven tribes were successful in the battle and utterly wiped out the men of Benjamin—all those of marrying and child-bearing ages. Only 600 men survived and hid in Rimmon, a rocky place that offered some protection, even against a massive army. There are no women of Benjamin for these men to marry, that they might continue their tribe. Whether the women were, in fact, killed along with the men, or merely regarded as *herem*, they could not provide wives for the men of Benjamin, for even if they were still alive, they were regarded as “off limits” and so were regarded as no longer part of Israel.

In verse 6 we read Israel had *compassion* for Benjamin saying, “One tribe is cut off from Israel this day.” You could translate that, “one tribe is *hacked* from Israel”. They chopped

down the tribe and then lamented the tribe was chopped down. In verse 7 they ask what they should do for the 600 men remaining, men who had no wives, apparently, being young soldiers. One thing they could have done was obey the Lord in the first place and seek justice against the perpetrators of the crime.

They also could have avoided the foolish oath we learn about in verse 1. When they first assembled at Mizpah with all their leaders, they swore an oath: “None of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin”. Intermarriage between the tribes happened rather frequently. They were all the covenant people of God. Inheritances came through the fathers so if a woman from the tribe of Reuben married a man in the priestly line of Levi, their son would still be in the priestly line even though he was “half” Reubenite.

Remember that Phinehas was high priest at the time. His father was Eleazar, Aaron’s son. Aaron was Moses’ brother and Israel’s first high priest. Eleazar married a non-Israelite woman who worshiped YHWH God of Israel. She was, apparently, a black African woman for they named their son Phinehas, which means “Black”. He was almost certainly half Nubian and would have looked more like his mother. The prohibition against marrying “foreign” women had nothing to do with ethnicity and everything to do with false worship! We see this early in Judges:

Jdgs 3:5 So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>6</sup> And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.

Judges 3:5–6

This is the same generation. The events of chapters 17–21 take place in that same generation that rebelled against the Lord and married foreign wives and *worshiped foreign gods*. Think of it: the men of Israel had sworn an oath they would not allow their daughters to marry men from the tribe of Benjamin, their fellow Israelites, yet they gladly married off their daughters to the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites! The result? *They served their gods*. They don’t want their daughters to marry the men of Benjamin, it seems, because they might end up serving the God of Benjamin, who is YHWH himself. Apparently that is the line they must not cross.

## Blaming God

In verse 3 they cry out to the Lord, only their cry is an accusation: why has this happened, this thing that has resulted in a tribe lacking in Israel? They’re really saying, “God, what have *you* done?”, or maybe, “What have you failed to do?” The next day they build an altar and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. It may appear they are worshiping the Lord, but being thoroughly Canaanite in their understanding, they’re simply trying to manipulate him.

Remember that ancient religion was a simple transaction: give a god or goddess what he or she demanded, and receive in return what you want. If I offer a sacrifice to a god, that god is now obligated to give me what I want. On the surface, building an altar and offering sacrifices to the Lord appears to be right behavior. In Exodus 20 God instructed them how

to build such temporary altars. They aren't gathered to worship the Lord, however, even as they cry out to him, but in accusation.

Notice again they do not ask him for direction! God is silent in this text. They accuse him of not stopping the atrocity they committed, and then, instead of asking what to do to make it right, they rely on their own understanding of what is good and right. In verse 5 they ask which tribe didn't show up for battle. Of course Benjamin didn't, but Benjamin doesn't have enough women left for these 600 men—because, you know, *they killed them all*. Then we discover another foolish oath they had made.

When they first arrived at Mizpah, not only did they swear they would not let their daughters marry any of the Benjaminites, they swore that anyone who did not join them in the war would be executed. Remember, they're doing what is right in their own mind; they think this is the right course of action! They further accuse the Lord—albeit indirectly—in verse 7: what are we supposed to do for wives for the remaining Benjaminites, since we have sworn *by the LORD* that we will not give them our daughters? And you know, God won't let us break that oath, no matter how badly we want to...*so it's kinda his fault*.

They ask again which tribe didn't join them. After checking their rolls they discover that Jabesh-gilead had not sent any soldiers. This was a city belonging to the tribe of Gad. Being a city really means it was fortified, and had many villages around it. Think of the city more as a region. The city did not muster men to send to the civil war so the army of Israel sent 12,000 soldiers to destroy that city and its villages. In their minds the best way to make amends for wholesale slaughter of an entire tribe is more wholesale slaughter. Israel *punished* an entire group of people for not participating in their slaughter of an entire tribe in Israel.

In this attack they destroyed everything—except the unmarried women. They found 400 young women and took them to Shiloh. Notice where the author claims Shiloh is located in verse 12: “and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, *which is in the land of Canaan*. Shiloh is in Ephraim, right in the heart of Israel. It is where the tabernacle was for 200 years. That is, God's presence was profoundly manifest in the tabernacle, which was at Shiloh, and the author claims it was *in the land of Canaan*, not the land of Israel. Thus the destruction of Jabesh-gilead was not Israelite behavior, but Canaanite behavior.

As we've seen, God's people have become thoroughly Canaanized in the land. They've adopted the ways of the Canaanites, worshiping their gods and acting according to their values and ethics. They murder an entire city and kidnap the unmarried young women and take them to the place where God's presence was made manifest among his people, as if they were some offering to be given to the Lord.

They send word to the 600 men hiding in Rimmon and offer them peace. When they return, they force these 400 women to marry them. Even in a culture that has fathers involved in finding husbands for their daughters, this seems incredibly barbaric. Fathers would not, generally speaking, arrange a marriage their daughters would find unacceptable. A daughter may not be happy about a proposed marriage, but if she were truly opposed to it, a loving father would not force it on her. This is because marriage wasn't based on attraction but on compatibility. They didn't view marriage like some rom-com with a young couple riding through a park on a tandem bicycle eating ice cream cones and taking goofy pictures together in a photo booth. A loving father wouldn't force his daughter to marry someone she didn't want to marry. All Israel does exactly this, and murdered the fathers

and brothers who could have protested.

They realize there aren't enough brides, however. The people still feel sorry for the men, sorry for what *the Lord* had done. In verse 15 the author offers a bit of their perspective. The people had compassion on the tribe of Benjamin. Why? *Because the Lord had made a breach* in Israel. Once again we see their accusation that this really comes down to the Lord, as if saying, "Hey, God is sovereign...he must have wanted this to happen".

## Right In Their Own Eyes

Instead of seeking the Lord, they figure out another way to provide wives for the remaining 200 men. The concern, they say, is *covenantal*: "There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel". The inheritance is not merely the normal sort of inheritance we might think of. Covenantal blessings were given through family lines. They claim real concern for covenantal faithfulness—for Israel's ongoing relationship with YHWH God!

They don't have enough concern for actually seeking the Lord, however. Once again they rely on their own wisdom and understanding and sense of what is good and right to make amends for their evil. Since they cannot break their oaths—that would *dishonor* the LORD, after all!—they must find another way. They point out the annual festival was near. This is likely the Feast of Booths Israel was commanded to keep.

This annual celebration would involve lots of singing and dancing, as it was the feast celebrating the harvest. Israelites would head to Shiloh to be near the tabernacle as part of their religious observance. The army notes that lots of young women—unmarried women—would be there, singing and dancing in the vineyards as they celebrated the Lord's kindness and generosity.

They tell the 200 men to go there and hide in the vineyards. Then, when the ladies come dancing, that is, when the young women of Israel would come to *worship the Lord through dance*, they should jump up, interrupt that worship, and grab the nearest girl and marry her. Obviously *their* fathers and brothers would still be alive, so in order to get away with kidnapping and forcefully marrying these girls, they should plead with them to be gracious to them. After all, *it's not like they captured the girls in war*. "Oh! And you didn't technically *give* them to us, because, you know, you swore an oath that you wouldn't, so...*you're welcome!*"

In verse 23 the author simply says the people of Benjamin did this, and took their wives, "whom they carried off". He doesn't mean carried off in the sense of carrying them across the thresholds of their new homes as they begin their happy lives together. These girls—all 600 of them—were forcefully kidnapped and forced into marriages against their will, all to make up for the crimes Israel itself committed against the tribe of Benjamin.

They cared enough to know the extent of the atrocity they had committed, yet they sought to make up for it...by committing more evil. They did not see it as evil, of course, for the author tells us they did what was right, only it was right *in their eyes*. From their perspective, everything was going well. As they saw things, everything was moving along quite well. They didn't see things from God's perspective.

Jdgs 2:11 And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD

and served the Baals.

<sup>3:7</sup> And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth.

<sup>3:12</sup> And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD.

<sup>4:1</sup> And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died.

<sup>6:1</sup> The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.

<sup>10:6</sup> The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him.

<sup>13:1</sup> And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

Judges 2:11; 3:7; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1

When we hear God's perspective, it's quite clear: Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. When we hear Israel's perspective, it's quite different: everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It's important to note they did what was *right* in their own eyes. They didn't think they were doing evil. They had come up with a way to justify their sin and rebellion against God.

## Cycles

We must remember this is the generation described early in the book. In chapter 2 we read of Joshua's death. The elders who knew Joshua died, and the very next generation—the first generation in the land—“did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel”. They did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped other gods. This was the generation that married foreign women and began to worship foreign gods.

In response to this rebellion, chapter 2 tells us the Lord began to raise up judges who would rescue Israel from their oppressors. I want you to see this for what it is. God raising up foreign oppressors was an incredible act of mercy and grace and kindness! In 2:10 we read, “And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel”. Because they had not personally seen his divine rescue, they abandoned him. So what was God's response? Was it to abandon them? No! God's response was to bring about the conditions necessary for them to know his work! To reintroduce himself and to show them the work he could do for Israel, he first had to raise up oppressors so there would be a reason to show his power!

Jdgs 2:16 Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.

Judges 2:16

To demonstrate his power to this new generation the Lord allowed their enemies to oppress them so that when they cried out to the Lord for deliverance they would see his power in action. The implicit complaint was that all of God's power was poured out on prior generations so God brought about the circumstances to show them his power to save. God would raise up a judge—a deliverer—who would rescue them. Then the cycle would continue:

Jdgs 2:18 Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. <sup>19</sup> But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

Judges 2:18–19

Israel immediately got caught in a cycle of sin, discipline, rescue, forgetting, more sin. And the cycle repeats. Each time God rescued them, he was showing Israel his power to save. Each time they forgot, God reminded them, trying to break the cycle. Each time God rescued them, they simply abandoned him yet again, doing what was right in their own eyes.

What makes their cycle of sin and discipline and rescue and more sin so much worse is they coated all of it with a veneer of religiosity. They believed they were doing the right thing, that their actions were in fact good and right. They *justified* their actions. Old Testament scholar Havilah Dharamraj explains.

In all three cases in this chapter, Israel's operations carry a semblance of legality. They seem to honour the strict letter of the law. But in fact, they brutalize both the letter and the spirit of the law. Yet these transgressions are rationalised so cunningly that anyone who protests can actually be rebuked for putting personal interests ahead of national interest.

All those who participate in these schemes do so under a cloak of religiosity—we note that the first two amendments are made in the presence of God with all the attendant paraphernalia of altars and offerings, and the third actually takes effect at his sanctuary.

Havilah Dharamraj, South Asia Bible Commentary

When Israel assembled together at Bethel, they merely pretended to be seeking the Lord. They had already destroyed Benjamin in civil war, yet they “wept bitterly” while calling out to the Lord. They offer sacrifices and continue their weeping and wailing for God to do something, yet they don't ask him what to do. Just as they decided in their own wisdom to engage in civil war, they decide once again to wipe out an entire city and its villages—their fellow Israelites who had nothing to do with the death of the Judahite woman.

As they weep and wail for the destruction they themselves brought about, they cry out to the Lord for their success and then, without seeking the Lord and his guidance, determined the right course of action was more bloodshed of innocent bystanders. Finally,



they determined it was good and right to interrupt the worship of the Lord during the festival and kidnap women and force them into marriages they did not want—*all in the name of the LORD!*

They would engage in “worship” of YHWH when it suited their needs, but for the most part, they were content to worship other gods and bow before carved images. They assumed that by offering the Lord what he “wanted”, they could get what they wanted, and this was *right* in their own eyes.

## Application

We come to the book of Judges feeling like we’ve witnessed a horrific car accident in 4k and slow motion. Every lurid and sordid detail seems to be worse than the one before. What started out so promising—God’s people inheriting the land he promised them—had turned out so very horrifying as God’s people turned on themselves and engaged in a brutal civil war, only to compound their evil through even more death and destruction in an attempt to make it right. Daniel Stulac, with his highly evocative imagery, explains the situation quite well.

In short, the book’s denouement plunges its reader into pure farce just as Israel’s larger-than-life strongman, bound and gagged, winds up a freakish jester before his pagan overlords. The main difference between these two conclusions, however, is that here are no Philistine idolaters. Here are no Midianites or Moabites. No Siseras, Eglons, or Adoni-Bezecks, crawling about the floor on their bleeding stumps. Israel’s true enemy—and the book’s real villain all along—appears only in the sheen of a silver ephod held up to the reader’s streaked and salty face. The Canaanite goblin lies within. Male or female, black or white, rich or poor, he makes a dirty joke of us all.

Daniel J. D. Stulac, “The Gift of the Grotesque”

In many ways the book of Judges functions like a mirror and reveals the depth of our own brokenness. No, we have not surrounded a house in Gibeah, and we have not offered our only child as a sacrifice, and we have not provoked the Philistines by burning their crops. We have not taken on the trappings of being king while rejecting the title. We have not refused to engage in battle until a woman cajoled us to do what the Lord commanded. In many ways, however, we have failed to cleanse the land of its idolatry.

Israel’s task was to purge the land of its idolatry, to cleanse it of any and all false religion. The entirety of the conquest of Canaan was wrapped up in God’s instruction to them in Deuteronomy 7: they must break down the altars of false worship and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire. Not only did they fail to destroy idolatry from the land, they failed to grasp this conquest had to take place first in their own hearts. They had failed to remember their primary confession of faith, and they failed to remember the very next command that was supposed to flow directly out of this confession of faith:

Deut 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Deuteronomy 6:4–5

To love the Lord is to seek to become like him, which was the basis of the entire law: you shall be holy for I am holy. Failing to love the Lord, Israel had no interest in becoming like him. Instead, they chose to become like the nations around them. Rather than destroy their religious furniture as God required, they built their own. They entered into the idolatry of the nations and embraced it as their national religion. Still, God continued to pursue them, as he sought to preserve among them a remnant until such a time as he himself would come and rescue his people. He would be Israel’s True Judge, Israel’s True Deliverer. This Deliverer would finally break the cycle of sin and death by becoming sin and enduring death.

It is because of the victory of Jesus over sin and death that you and I can be victorious. It is because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done that we can, in fact, conquer the land he has given us. That land is not a physical space. The kingdom of God has no borders, no boundaries, no geographic space. The kingdom of God is found wherever Jesus is Lord. This is, first and foremost, in each one of us, for this is our common confession.

We do not seek to expand his kingdom geographically. We are not out to change the world by forcing the ethics of the kingdom on other people. The kingdom grows very differently, as it grows in the hearts of God’s people. This is the promise of the new covenant: God’s law—his self-revelation and character—is written on our hearts, not on tablets of stone. We follow the Spirit. We are not engaged in a conquest of the world. The apostle Paul explained this in his letter to the Corinthians. After reminding them of something he wrote in an earlier letter that we do not have, he explained the scope of our conquest:

1 Cor 5:12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

1 Corinthians 5:12–13

The land we are to conquer is the church, and this conquest begins with our own hearts. We must root out idolatry from within, and then from our midst. Our role in this world has nothing to do with judging outsiders! Our mission does not include purging sin from those outside the church; our mission is to pursue holiness in the church, to break the cycles of sin that so easily grasp us.

We cannot do this alone. We need the Holy Spirit to empower us for holy living. We need the church, for the Holy Spirit dwells in his church. We need one another, for the Lord uses means to accomplish his purposes and the means for living transformed lives have been given by the Holy Spirit and through the church.

When we feel discouraged, we need the church to encourage us. When we’re walking in sin, we need the church to exhort us. When we’re feeling lost and directionless, we need the church to give us wisdom. When we are tempted, we need the church to strengthen us. When we are hurting, we need the church to comfort us. As with Israel, when we begin to forget the Lord and forget his work for us, we need the church to remind us of who the Lord is and what he has done for us. The Spirit of God works through his people.